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ABSTRACT

This document provides a theory on successful aging and describes a workshop method devised to inspire middle-aged and older adults to meet and embrace the challenge of growing older. A five-stage model is proposed, based on the assumptions that aging adults need not be victims of the various scenarios of aging that exist in American culture and that they can carve out individualized maps or life designs which will be meaningful for them as they age. Testing of the Creating New Maps model in workshop and lecture formats is discussed and the five stages necessary for successful completion of the workshop are described: (1) aging and power; (2) awareness and expression of emotions; (3) reframing/neutralizing negative thinking; (4) human models/ordinary heroes and heroines; and (5) daring to dream. Based on the multiple dimensions of map-making, clinical, political, and spiritual implications for understanding and helping adults take more effective charge of their aging process are discussed. (NB)

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NEW MAPS:

CREATING A PERSONAL PLAN FOR AGING

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NEW MAPS: CREATING A PERSONAL PLAN FOR AGING

Introduction

Getting older is not a timid operation. Nonetheless, the myths and stereotypes of aging project too grim a scenario. For example, a good deal of psychological theory and research focused on adult development and aging tends to reinforce negative stereotyping by stressing losses and decline (Cumming & Henry, 1961). However, concepts like generativity (Erikson, 1963), androgyny (Bem, 1976), sex role transcendence (Rebecca, Hefner, & Oleshansky, 1976), agelessness (Kaufman, 1986), widening of consciousness (Jung, 1971), and spiritual ascent (Bianchi, 1986; Teilhard de Chardin, 1960) offer more positive models of aging.

The purpose of this paper is to provide both a theory and a workshop method devised by the authors to inspire middle-aged and older adults to meet and embrace the challenge of growing older.

Two assumptions underlie our proposed five stage model. First, we believe that, with increased awareness, we need not be victims of the various scenarios on aging that exist in our culture. Second, we are convinced that, with encouragement, we can carve out individualized maps or personal life designs which can be rich and meaningful.

The original inspiration for designing New Maps workshops derived from our realization that there were few

creative maps for the process of aging. Furthermore, the maps that existed, particularly for women, were outmoded and defeating, such as a Betty Crocker grandmother baking cookies in the kitchen or Xantippe, the embittered shrew. It was as though when one passed middle age, one entered into a geography of being neutered sexually, becoming invisible in the world, without personal power, and the focus was on diminishment of looks, physical capacity and perhaps of mental capacity. Certainly, there are powerful realities of diminishment of certain capacities (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), an altered sense of time left to live, the active awareness of one's eventual death (Becker, 1973), and a youth-oriented culture which rejects age and the aging (Melamed, 1983; Sontag, 1972).

The authors did not wish to make light of these vivid aging changes of physical function, economic realities and other losses. Rather, we were inspired to respond to the huge gap we perceived, where possible maps might exist, for taking charge of one's aging. Many persons have indeed taken charge of their own aging; in effect they have created maps and models which now exist as a part of our collective experience. One such is Maggie Kuhn and the Grey Panthers, who have politicized the issues of aging and the particular problems that older people face in a youth-oriented culture that largely ignores the elderly.

In the workshops, we sought to enable people to fight through the heavy weight of the negative cultural stereotypes, in effect to not buy into them, first by becoming conscious of what these negative images are. Then to experience in supportive group settings how to carve out new maps, new directions and realizable aspirations for ourselves for the next 10 to 20 years of our lives.

Inherent in this concept are two assumptions. One is that new maps for aging are possible, and that we are all capable of creating new maps, especially in a supportive peer context. The second is that there are already many persons who have created new directions, whose work needs to become part of our collective consciousness, so that we recognize, honor and find hope in these positive, existing maps.

Method

Group Characteristics

The Creating New Maps model was tested in both workshop and lecture formats. We worked with mixed, male and female, groups and with all women groups. Participants were drawn from a weekend seminar group, and from psychotherapy clients referred by colleagues, as well as from the leaders' mailing lists and other contacts.

The participants were primarily in the middle income bracket, were educated at least through high school; the

majority were college graduates, some with advanced degrees. On the whole, they tended to be psychologically and spiritually minded. The majority were in good physical health. The group sizes ranged from 9 members in some instances to 35 persons in others. The self-selected persons who attended ranged in age from 37 to 75 years; the mean age was 45.

A variety of timeframes and formats was used: day-long, one-half day, weekend, weekly meetings. Participants paid a fee to attend.

The leaders drew from their clinical training and professional experience in gerontology, holistic and transpersonal approaches to mind/body healing, peace activism, femininism, personal mythology work, cognitive theory, and developmental psychological theory.

Content of the Group Summarized

The meta theme of the workshop was the possibility that we are able to create in thought and feeling maps which we can then mobilize in our lives. Following initial introductions, members were asked to share instances from their lives of a sense of their own powerfulness and powerlessness in relation to aging and in this context were encouraged to express their pain and resentments about the oppression of aging in a youth-centered culture.

In the second workshop phase, the concept of emotional awareness and its relationship to aging was explained.

Participants were then introduced to a modified Re-evaluation Counseling and Focusing model, which they practiced and used. Participants were instructed to do a personal assessment, a life scan, to become aware of negative patterns, unfulfilled dreams and spiritual and psychological longings. Members were guided to be alert to their judgmental, self-critical tendencies and to their rigid thought patterns.

Subsequently, the group was guided in an in-depth assessment of negative thought patterns, for example, identifying ways each person stops himself from pursuing his passionate dreams. The role of the inner critic was explored, theoretically and experientially, in terms of undermining confidence and limiting vision. Then the leaders described a model of self support based on cognitive reframing and members practiced this new behavior in both small and large group contexts.

The next phase of the workshop focused on developing models of successful aging, drawn from each member's real life experience and from imagined older persons. They were encouraged to utilize ordinary heroes and heroines as their human models, rather than to aspire to larger-than-life heroes, who create defeat and demoralization by comparison.

The leaders then introduced concepts of envisioning and setting life intentions and the power of the mind to work on these images as though they were already real. Through experiential exercises, participants recalled in their lives

when this phenomenon had occurred; in other words, when they had experienced a strong wish that became realized. Participants were then invited to "dare to dream" about their lives in 20 years as they would like them to be, in as much detail as possible. While incorporating the valued qualities of their human models into their mapmaking, participants began to design their personal plans for aging.

Throughout the workshop, the leaders provided members with current theory and research on aging, for example, issues of health, spirituality, sexuality, career and sex-role differences.

The group closed with a structured ritual which represented a synthesis of their new life maps.

Five Stages of Map-Making

The successful completion of each workshop required that each participant be guided through a five stage process. Each stage made its unique contribution to the final synthesis.

Stage 1: Aging and Power

In the beginning stages of map-making, each group member was asked to recall times when they had felt powerful or powerless with respect to aging. Participants proudly spoke of achievements such as climbing a mountain and quitting smoking. They also mentioned feeling powerful because they were choosing to be less sarcastic and more direct, even

vulnerable, in their communications. Some reported feeling less achievement-oriented, more spiritual, more service-oriented.

On the powerless side, participants reported loss of energy, stamina, youth and good looks. They noticed increased moodiness and the powerlessness connected with the loss of a parent.

These shared experiences of power and powerlessness were highly evocative and cathartic. From the richness of the group's experiences several exciting ideas emerged. First, it seemed clear that the traditional notions of power defined, for example, as status or control over others, were infrequently mentioned. In contrast, participants tended to value achievements or accomplishments based on a sense of their own self-control and self-trust. In addition, it seemed that both male and female members were choosing to be more direct or assertive with others without needing to dominate them (another traditional power notion). And they would choose to share vulnerable feelings which could include difficult feelings as well as expressions of care and the longing to connect. Eccentricity appeared to be valued as a kind of strength or power. Participants valued the freedom to behave in ways that are usually stereotyped by age or sex role definitions.

Underlying these observations was the sense that a certain flexibility may be inherent in the successful and even

powerful process of getting older (Mullin, 1983).

Stage 2: Awareness and Expression of Emotions

The experience of recreating and describing life situations in which participants had felt powerful and powerless with respect to aging provided a natural seque into explorations of and approaches to emotions and their expression. The issues that are connected to aging are emotion laden for everyone to some degree. Most individuals, including those who choose to attend the workshops, have developed over the course of their lives defenses and attitudes which are habituated and to some extent preconscious, some of which are no longer useful. It is our strong belief that people can choose to grow and change and become more aware until the end of their lives. The workshop experience is intended to validate this choice for personal growth as an important prognosticator of mental and physical health in later life.

In this second workshop stage, participants are invited to explore their emotions and the ways in which they express (or avoid expression of) these emotions. Our model combines emotional discharge theories and techniques, namely Re-Evaluation Counseling (Jackins, 1965) and focusing skills (Gendlin, 1978). In pairs and under supervision, participants learn and practice some of the basic techniques of acting as counselor and as client. The focus is to train participants to learn listening and focusing skills, so they have increased choices in their awareness and expression of

emotions.

The concerns about aging that the participants voiced in all the workshops fall into two broad categories. Some issues may be described as life concerns that recur throughout the life cycle, such as finding a suitable life partner, engaging in creative work and meaningful activity, maintaining friendships and styles of money management. There were other matters that participants viewed as becoming a focused concern after a particular age, such as financial management after retirement, ability to finance health care, financial or physical dependency upon family or strangers. In the view of the leaders, both kinds of concerns are valid and essential to be explored in a workshop on aging.

The co-counseling and focusing skills are taught and practiced in the initial workshop, to heighten awareness of participants' interaction between the issues of aging and their feeling responses; the acquired skills serve to underline the necessity of emotional awareness to full functioning in the aging process. At the end of a workshop, a group may decide to stay together and to meet as a peer support group on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. They are then encouraged to receive further training in these self-support emotional skills.

Stage 3: Reframing/Neutralizing Negative Thinking

Identifying the self-critic was a major emphasis in the effective map-making process. It represented the essential

clearing work necessary to complement the imagery work, which is the final step in the process.

Leaders coached members in observing and declaring their unreported self-critical and distorted thoughts and beliefs (Beck, 1976). Members were reminded to listen carefully, for understanding. They discovered how much they blame themselves, stop themselves from doing positive things, hold tight to regrets and unrealistic expectations, set rigid requirements, catastrophize, discount themselves automatically, and overgeneralize. As leaders, we argued strongly that this old and often useless baggage had to be recognized and discarded. This ancient material leaves little room for joy or passion or creative life planning.

After participants were trained to better recognize these negative thought patterns, they were instructed to reframe their thinking in more positive and liberating ways. For example, one member shared that he was convinced that he was "just too old to do anything creative." He reported feeling hopeless and despairing, and even depressed, about this experienced reality. With careful listening it was discovered that his requirement for creativity meant that he must write the music for a song. He did not believe that the rest of his life had potential or real creative elements. His tendency to set rigid requirements was brought to his awareness and he was encouraged to expand his definition of musical creativity to include writing lyrics. His

definition of his own creativity was reframed and hopefuly enlivened.

To summarize, participants were encouraged to become aware of and to express their feelings about growing older. Then they were coached to help themselves and each other to recognize habitual negative thought patterns that create unconscious blocks to their own growth and change in relation to aging.

Stage 4: Human Models/Ordinary Heroes and Heroines

Much of the literature on aging, particularly of the "looking on the bright side" variety, uses models of aging heroic figures that we are encouraged to emulate. The message has a pontificating, moralistic tone ("Look at Picasso, or Margaret Mead, or Georgia O'Keefe.") The implied message is that one can and should be just like these larger-than-life models in terms of their creativity and output. The tendency is to pick as positive models people who are almost heroic in aspect. It is our belief that the results of this kind of comparison often have the opposite effect: that people feel immobilized by the comparison, that they cannot envision coming close to the mark of the heroic model and so become defeated in the process. In other words, we argue for the ordinary hero/heroine (Janeway, 1980).

In our concept of human models, we encourage participants to create a composite model of how they might like to

age, drawn from several older persons they have encountered during their lives, who had one or more characteristics or behaviors that they aspired to. One human model might have been very forthright and outspoken in style, another model might have found activities about which she felt and behaved passionately, a third might have successfully created a supportive, communal living situation. While other aspects of these models' lives might have been unsatisfactory or unfulfilling, the selected qualities were sources of inspiration to the participants; they often described a felt sense of "Oh, I could do that too."

Persons creating a vision, a composite image of who and how they would like to be in 10-20 years, do not suffer by comparison to these human models; rather they can serve to inspire precisely because what they have done could be done by the participants. In effect the behaviors of the partial models appear do-able, and they can be modified, altered to fit the individual life situation of the participant.

Stage 5: Daring to Dream

A necessary aspect of taking charge of the direction of one's life is to be able to envision it as one would like it to be. A common behavior for people, in talking about a goal, is to remain vague, undefined in their description, unable to see the goal in their mind's eye. For example, many people are involved in social action toward a goal of peace in the world; surprisingly, many of them have great

difficulty in visioning what peace might look like, how it might actually be to experience peace.

Our core belief in designing the workshop was that daring to dream, by actively imagining what one might like to do or be in the future, would begin a complex process for each participant. As they began to activate thinking about their dream, they awakened their energies and capacities as well as the important ingredient of hope. Moving from a relatively impotent position of "if only" or "I wish I could...." into an active power position of intention was for many a turning point in the workshop experience. It constituted assuming one's personal sense of power.

Both authors drew from a variety of clinical experiences which validated the power of visioning: relating, creating potent mental pictures, then meditating actively and frequently on these images (Assagioli, 1971; Oyle, 1975; Simonton, Simonton, Matthew, & Creighton, 1978; Thompson, 1976). Our concept was that one could create one's dream or vision of one's life in some detail and focus on this vision. It was our thinking that repetition of this imagining would create a psychomotor coordination; in other words, a combination of vision and action. This coordination has four aspects. The first is the rehearsal function which is to vision clearly in one's mind a desired goal and to experience in the body the positive feelings associated with attaining that goal. The second step is to break down the

attainment of the goal into do-able actions. The third step is to begin to take action on the steps. Lastly, each step toward the envisioned goal needs to be consciously perceived and validated by the participant.

In the workshop setting we were able to start participants on this process and to teach them how to maintain the goal orientation on their own by the end of the workshop. For example, one participant wanted to live with other people in a community setting. After visioning the specifics of this goal, she began contacting already existing communities to gather information, as well as exploring this possibility with friends who might share her interest.

Follow Up Groups

In order for participants to experience real and felt shifts in their attitudes, feelings and expectations about their aging, they are encouraged to form an ongoing support group. Various forms are possible: bi-weekly or once monthly models are the most frequently chosen. Groups may elect to bring in a therapist or trained group leader every fifth or sixth meeting to facilitate the maintenance of previously acquired group skills or to focus on a particular topic.

The rationale for the ongoing support groups is that changing thought and behavior patterns that have existed over one's lifetime is not easy work. A group focused on

creating new cognitive maps and enacting these maps over time provides a powerful facilitation of these intentions. It offers as well a safe place in which to discharge feelings of failure and discouragement and to celebrate personal victories. Participants who have been together in an ongoing workshop experience can use this existing structure for follow-up, support, maintenance of changes they have begun in the workshop and the acquisition of new skills.

Consideration Implications

Based on the multiple dimensions of map-making described above, there are far-reaching clinical, political, spiritual implications for understanding and helping men and women of middle years and beyond to take more effective charge of their aging process.

Clinical Implications

The combined use of cognitive-behavioral techniques and guided imagery has implications for effectively alleviating depression, organizing career transitions, maintaining and increasing a sense of personal power and self-esteem. We would expect that the map-making techniques, by improving the quality of life, have implications for longevity and physical robustness. Building and maintaining a passionate interest and outlook certainly improves a sense of well-being. For example, one participant, age 68, stated that she has to live 20 years more, because she needs to complete

her work in painting, which she began 3 years ago. Helping individuals to identify their already available personal powers maintains a sense of self-definition in the face of other impairments or diminishments. Finally, improving the active use of imagination potentially fosters a heightened sense of play, creativity and the courage to dream (Assagioli, 1971), which are all clearly aspects of successful aging.

Political Implications

As leaders, we are aware of the varying levels of oppressions the aging adult faces. For example, many people feel isolated in their personal experiences of diminishment and decline vis-a-vis aging and in the loss of self-esteem related to agist attitudes. The permission to complain in the context of our supportive group released feelings of bitterness and defeat and often led to shouts of humorous recognition, acknowledgment and even to inspired social action. Women complained that their inner sense of still being young and attractive was contradicted by the feeling of invisibility or being seen as old, wrinkled and undesirable.

In the "Daring to Dream" process, there is an inherent loosening of sex roles possible, because people are often drawn to complete or round out aspects of personality they have not yet developed. One man reported feeling less ashamed of showing his tears publicly. Members of the group

reported celebrating the freedom to dress and behave with a spirit of abandon, that pushed the limits of age and sex. This finding is reminiscent of Jung's (1971) concept of the contrasexual opposite and Rebecca et al.'s (1976) model of sex role transcendence.

We have made a clear choice to work with combined male/female groups, taking into consideration the double standard of aging (Sontag, 1972). We invite men and women to struggle together and to support each other in the process of map-making.

Spiritual Implications

Facing forward to our aging from the perspective of middle years and beyond compels us to confront our own dying. No matter what our individual religious/spiritual beliefs are, we look at the stark fact of death, and what may or may not lie beyond (Becker, 1973). What is perhaps more difficult than facing our death is getting to the point of death: dying, either slowly through natural aging or through debilitating, catastrophic illness.

The losses that come with aging are very familiar: health, physical capacity, changes in appearance, deaths of friends and family, a narrowing of our network of personal supports, economic losses and often radical reductions in style of life, and many more. We are aware of the dangers of glossing over these hard and real facets of aging. Bianchi (1986), for example, writes that the potential task

of aging persons is spiritual growth through these diminishments. The process is like a winnowing, in which the soul shines through, stripped bare of many former ways of being and doing. And this essential being can be a radiance, a benefit to others.

It seems to us that, in order for this spiritual growth process to take place effectively, the intention (the map) for it needs to be carved out in advance. And this is one of the spiritual implications of the map process. That we may intend deeply who and how we wish to be, even if the specifics of our life situation take very different directions from the initial envisioning.

In effect, we are speaking through map-making toward an intention of becoming, of realizing yet fuller aspects of ourselves. For instance, we encourage mapping out an individual's longing for increasing altruism, in other words, mobilizing the wish to be more creatively caring. The workshop reinforces the tendency toward a reflective inner journey and nurtures participants to find or elaborate their individual ways into this journey, such as meditation, yoga, gardening, tai chi, art work, and journal writing.

The very concept of our lives as a journey is for us a spiritual theme. And we believe that the midlife and beyond journey is potentially one to the interior, the inward being. Discarding outmoded ways of being and thinking, and visioning who we would still aspire to become are integral

aspects of this spiritual odyssey.

Considerations for Map-Making

We believe the intense work of the map-making is optimally begun in one's early 40's, though it seems to be useful across the decades. Inherent in the design is the time factor of rehearsal. More specifically, each individual needs to try on and practice, over time, and with support, aspects of the new behaviors and attitudes being explored. In the 40's, as opposed to the 60's, there may be a realistic sense of choice, combined with an optimistic, energetic spirit, when one has not already experienced some of the potentially severe losses of later life.

Because of the youth-oriented focus of our culture, many people are fearful and reluctant to face the issues of later life, as well as their own death. One difficulty in offering this workshop is that people can easily avoid the issues by avoiding the workshops that relate to issues of midlife and beyond. Therefore, finding new and effective ways to enable people to attend and consequently to plan creatively their lives is a challenge inherent in our work.

We are interested in exploring the transferability of this workshop model to other socio-economic groups. Life style issues for further exploration within our groups include: health options, various living arrangements, sexual preference and opportunity, and social service involvements. We see a place for this work in industrial settings,

religious communities, educational systems and the media.

Conclusion

We are both midlife women, who have experienced in our personal lives and in our roles as psychologists a sense of mystification about aging processes and a lack of societal skills for handling them. The workshop grew out of our dismay at the apparent focus on aging in the literature as a snowball effect of escalating losses. Two of our core beliefs are reflected in the workshop, namely: (1) that growth and change are possible throughout the whole life cycle, and (2) that we are capable of envisioning who we want to be and of bringing these visions into actual being.

Aging itself is an inevitability we must all accept, with as much grace as we can muster. What we argue for in our workshops is that we are capable of far more mapping for the project of our aging than what is usually included in retirement planning approaches. We advocate the creation of new cognitive maps for our later years and the practice of them sufficiently that their essence and intention can become manifest in our lives.

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